

University of Mississippi eGrove

Honors Theses

Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale
Honors College)

2014

In Another Day: The Historical and Cultural Relevance of Gone With The Wind

Cody Rentz

University of Mississippi. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rentz, Cody, "In Another Day: The Historical and Cultural Relevance of Gone With The Wind" (2014). *Honors Theses*. 215.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/215

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

IN ANOTHER DAY: THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF *GONE
WITH THE WIND*

by

Cody Rentz

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford

May 2014

Approved by

Advisor: Dr. David Wharton

Reader: Dr. Leigh Anne Duck

Reader: Dr. Molly Pasco-Pranger

© 2014

Cody Rentz

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, whose love of *Gone with the Wind* inspired mine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of several people who have guided me through the research and writing process.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. David Wharton, my thesis advisor, for all of the time spent helping me research, talking with me to help me get my thoughts organized, proofreading countless drafts of my thesis, and helping me develop my writing skills.

Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Leigh Anne Duck, who spent nearly as much time helping me as Dr. Wharton during the writing process. Dr. Duck also read many drafts of the document and gave me extensive help in planning and writing my literary analysis.

I would also like to thank Dr. Debra Young, my honors advisor, for all of her help in the technical and formal process of the senior thesis; Dr. Molly Pasco-Pranger, my third reader, for completing my thesis committee; and Dr. Joan Wylie Hall, whose after-class conversations with me birthed the idea that became this project.

ABSTRACT

CODY RENTZ: The Historical and Cultural Relevance of *Gone with the Wind*

(Under the direction of Dr. David Wharton)

Although it was a massive success in its time and won a Pulitzer Prize, critics today tend to discard *Gone with the Wind* as a piece of low-quality, racist, historically inaccurate literature. However, the novel, through no intent of its author, parallels the Great Depression in many ways, a fact that likely contributed to its popularity. As such, the novel can be a useful tool in studying the culture of the 1930s. To study the cultural connections, I began by reading the novel, watching the film, and speculating as to the connections to Depression-era culture. I then researched the author, Margaret Mitchell, to learn the perspective from which she wrote. I read William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* to put *Gone with the Wind* in comparison with other literature of its time. I also researched 1930s culture to provide background for my comparisons. I then performed my own literary analysis of *Gone with the Wind* from a historical perspective, using my previous research as a basis. I discovered that there are many parallels between the novel and the era. I also compared the novel, the film adaptation, and 1930s culture to explore the cultural information that can be gleaned from the film as well.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
I. A DECADE OF CHANGES	3
II. MARGARET MITCHELL AND <i>GONE WITH THE WIND</i>	10
III. RECEPTION	16
IV. LITERARY ANALYSIS	20
V. LITERARY PERSPECTIVE	52
VI. THE FILM	59
CONSLUSION	65
BIBLIOGRAPHY	70

Introduction

In 1936, a young Atlanta journalist published her first novel, a spare time project that Macmillan, one of America's largest publishing firms, discovered almost by accident. The book was an instant success. Despite its length and its price of \$3.00 – fifty cents more than a standard novel – it exceeded every expectation concerning sales and still remains America's best-selling novel. The writer, of course, was Margaret Mitchell, and the book was *Gone with the Wind*. Readers pored over the epic saga of Scarlett O'Hara as she fought against the Civil War and the society around her and as she faced trials and triumphs in life and in love. The equally successful film adaptation, released three years later, displayed just how large the phenomenon was. It was the novel that defined a decade.

The popularity of the novel alone should be enough to warrant in-depth study. After all, if so many people read it and enjoyed it so much, it stands to reason that they found the book relevant to their lives and their society. Instead, many critics in recent years have held the novel's popularity against it, discarding it as popular literature not worth serious study. For some, its racist sentiments and its historical inaccuracy keep it from being a worthwhile academic venture. Generally, if the novel receives any sort of academic study, it is only to help illustrate Southern ideas of femininity or race. The sheer popularity of the novel, however, suggests that it has more to offer to anyone wishing to study the culture of the era of the Great Depression. While much of the

novel's surface appeal was likely linked to the escapist nature of its historical setting, there are numerous parallels between the events and ideology of the novel and those of the Depression era. From a historical perspective, this oft-overlooked novel is a wealth of cultural information – about the South and about the United States in general – and is a valuable piece of Depression-era literature. Looking at *Gone with the Wind* from a Depression-era perspective can lead to a greater understanding of Depression-era culture.

This thesis is a brief introduction to what such a study could entail. In this thesis, I will conduct a brief analysis of *Gone with the Wind* – the novel, the film, and the phenomenon as a whole – and highlight some of its relevance for studying the 1930s. I will begin by providing some historical and cultural context; everything in my analyses will refer back to this historical information. I will then give a brief biography of Margaret Mitchell, leading up to the publication of *Gone with the Wind*, to give a clearer idea of the background that went into the writing of the novel. Next, I will detail some of the responses to the novel, as many of my claims will use the popularity of the novel as basis for their validity. Afterward, I will provide a few analyses of the novel, dealing specifically with the topics of change, gender, sexuality, and race. I will compare the novel to William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (published the same year) to provide greater understanding of the literary climate of the era. Finally, I will detail how the popularity of the novel led to the equally popular film and compare the film to the novel, highlighting the differences to shed even more light on the world of entertainment at the time.

I. A Decade of Changes

The 1930s were a time of great change for all Americans. During this time, Americans were forced to adapt to shifting cultural ideals, values, and tastes in addition to radical economic, political, and social changes. The entire decade was marked by the Great Depression, the worst and most well-known economic downturn in United States history. The economic changes of the Depression brought about political changes in the form of the New Deal and social changes that were in some ways the result of shifts in the economic and political climate. Cultural ideals and values moved in both directions, becoming simultaneously more conservative and broader than they had been previously, depending upon who was observing them. In literary circles, the “New Criticism” gave critics a fresh way of analyzing and appraising literature, resulting in a shift in writing trends. All of these changes led to a general shift in taste in the realms of art, music, and literature.

Economics

Most of the changes of the time can be linked to the Great Depression. The economic collapse of 1929 changed many aspects of life for most Americans. According to Paul Conkin, the stock market crash was an inevitable result of the prosperity of the previous decade. The permissive free market economy that developed in the late nineteenth century reached the height of its productivity in what came to be known as the “Roaring Twenties.” Led by Republican President Herbert Hoover, most of the nation

enjoyed immense prosperity. Many political leaders, however, failed to understand the workings of this economic system and the political measures needed to maintain it.

Ultimately, a downturn was inevitable. Hoover missed many of the major moral and social problems that were developing, such as a focus on profit above all else or the lack of understanding on the part of big corporations concerning the public and the common man – problems that led to exploitation of the lower classes. Hoover's dream was to have a completely free economy that was self-sustaining, held in place by morality and community responsibility. However, the moral failings in the economic system, such as the exploitation of the lower classes, made this dream an impossibility. Eventually, things came to a point at which no measure could have prevented the collapse. Any measure that would have worked would have imposed unwanted restraint on the people. In Conkin's words, "The cure almost had to come after the collapse" (Conkin 24).

In the 1932 presidential election, Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt used the failures of the Republican Party to swing the vote in his favor. Roosevelt was full of charm, charisma, slogans, and smiles, and he championed the cause of "the people." He had a plan to try to fix the economy, and upon his inauguration, he put that plan into action, creating many new governmental agencies with the express purpose of providing relief for the people affected by the poor economy. These new agencies experienced mixed success. Some, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which aimed to help relieve poverty in rural areas but which actually forced small farmers, sharecroppers, and tenants off of the land by benefitting primarily successful farmers, hurt more than they helped. Others were successful, but only marginally. The Works Progress Administration, for example, was created to provide

work programs for the unemployed. Unfortunately, it was only able to employ about one third of those who needed jobs, and it was hindered by a “lack of developed plans for massive public works, by an oversupply of unskilled laborers, and by rigid rules” (Conkin 56). Some agencies, however, such as the Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration), created to help the poorest farmers, developed programs that were helpful to individuals if not to the economy as a whole.

Roosevelt’s New Deal met with strong opposition from both ends of the political spectrum. Many conservatives felt that the federal government’s assuming such responsibility over the lives of citizens was a danger to personal integrity and that “[s]ustained gifts from governments would create a passive, alienated group of men, without a real stake in society, with no compelling involvement, and with a dangerous political tendency to march in step with any demagogue promising more welfare” (Conkin 54). Other conservatives wanted a return to what they called “Jefferson’s America,” a “truly propertied society” (Conkin 54). They were against the paternalistic servile system fostered by large corporations and felt that the welfare measures of the New Deal would only perpetuate this system. The socialist left, on the other hand, felt that the New Deal was a sort of insurance for the existing capitalist economy. They felt that welfare was a way of appeasing those who would otherwise bring about a needed new economic system.

Art, Entertainment, and Media

While these political and economic changes were taking place, the realms of art, entertainment, literature, and journalism were undergoing changes of their own. Many of these changes can be attributed to the psychological results of the Depression, while

others were simply born of the changes in taste that come naturally with the passing of time. Either way, the arts, entertainment, and media of the decade generally reflected the feelings and beliefs of those who lived during that time.

In the 1920s, jazz had emerged as a popular genre of music, and that popularity continued to develop in the 1930s. Like most elements of popular culture, jazz both reflected and influenced the society around it. In *James Agee: A Life*, Laurence Bergreen describes the values espoused by jazz music thus: “It was coarse, it was fun, it was sexual, it was spontaneous” (Bergreen 151). The energy and spontaneity of jazz music, which relies heavily upon improvisation, provided an escape from dull daily life while also reflecting a feeling of uncertainty regarding the future.

Meanwhile, the continual success of the magazine *Time* despite the collapse and the Depression indicates a general desire on the part of Americans to be well-informed – or at least to appear so. First published in 1923, *Time* was a weekly magazine that summarized the week’s news, “gleaned from the far more detailed but much less readable columns of the daily papers. As [founder Henry] Luce liked to say, ‘We reached the conclusion that people were not well-informed and that something should be done’” (Bergreen 114). In a time in which many businesses collapsed, the continued popularity of *Time* made it one of the Depression’s great success stories.

In the realm of literature, meanwhile, a radical change was underway. Early on in the 1930s, T. S. Eliot, Ivor Armstrong Richards, and other scholars developed what would later be dubbed the “New Criticism,” a “revolutionary approach to the interpretation of literature” (Bergreen 82). According to the tenets of New Criticism, literature should be analyzed and judged “with scientific precision and in complete

isolation from cultural or historical considerations.” It also “advocated the application of Freudian psychoanalytic principles to criticism, especially in the study of character and symbol” (Bergreen 82). In other words, proponents of New Criticism felt that cultural and historical context (as well as the life and intentions of the author) should not be considered when analyzing literature. Instead, it should be viewed entirely on its own, with careful attention being paid to the arrangement of words and symbolism. As New Criticism developed, critics began to change their expectations of literature, and an emphasis on aestheticism and style developed. As a result, many writers began using stylized, complex language with close attention to tone and form.

Film was fast becoming a mainstay of popular culture, and thanks to *The Birth of a Nation* (released in 1915), it was already taken seriously as an art form. The world of filmmaking underwent radical changes in the 1930s as well. The advent of talking pictures in 1928 opened a new frontier for filmmakers in the next decade. Around the same time, the Technicolor process was introduced, though it was used sparingly (only in the most lavish of films) at the time. As with music and literature, style became an important component of film as an art, and audiences particularly enjoyed lavish films of epic proportions.

Gender and Sexuality

The strong feminist movement of the 1920s, strengthened by the advent of women’s suffrage and characterized by anti-war lobbying and by pride in motherhood, diminished somewhat, though certainly not entirely, in the 1930s. With the Depression in full swing, “[m]any people believed that working married women were partly responsible for unemployment” (Strom 361). The government responded according to that belief,

and the Economy Act of 1932 “allowed the firing of one spouse if both husband and wife worked for the government, and of the fifteen hundred married persons fired within the next year, nearly all were women” (Strom 361). Even Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman ever to hold a cabinet position, encouraged women who did not need jobs to remain in the home. Simultaneously, the “Cult of Domesticity” developed. This “Cult of Domesticity” was characterized by an emphasis on and admiration of the position and duties of motherhood. In the book *Americans at War*, D’Ann Campbell writes that “[p]acifist feminism” – as opposed to the active feminism of the 1920s – “played a major role in the isolationist mood that formed U.S. national policy in the mid and late 1930s” (Campbell 57). Although feminism still existed, it was not yet mature enough as a movement to remain strong in the face of the Depression.

The psychological theories of Sigmund Freud were widespread during this time, and their popularity manifested itself in the area of sexuality. Freud’s ideas of human development were centered on sexuality, and he developed ideas and terms such as “infantile sexuality” and “Oedipus complex.” During this time, attitudes toward sexuality were becoming less conservative than they had been previously, and the public interest in Freud’s blunt writings contributed to this shift. While detailing events from James Agee’s life, Bergreen describes a game called Sardines that illustrates the effects of the general interest in Freudian ideas. “The rules were simple,” he writes, “When the lights were turned off, couples formed spontaneously and dashed off to a private corner for a few moments’ furtive groping” (Bergreen 186). Additionally, letters written by Agee suggest that sexual intimacy outside of marriage was more common than it had been previously. Sexual repression and taboos were still strict, however, as evidenced by

the relatively tame (by modern standards) nature of novels and films that were considered “racy” at the time, but the standards were loosening. People were thinking about and exploring sexuality more publically than they had previously.

II. Margaret Mitchell and *Gone with the Wind*

Margaret Mitchell was born on November 8, 1900, in Atlanta, Georgia, the city in which she would live nearly her entire life. Her father, Eugene Mitchell, was an attorney of Scottish descent. The Mitchell family moved to Wilkes County, Georgia in 1777, in time for Thomas Mitchell to serve in the American Revolutionary War. Eugene Mitchell's father, Russell Crawford Mitchell of Atlanta, served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War and made a fortune selling lumber during reconstruction. Margaret Mitchell's mother, Maybelle Stephens Mitchell, was descended from an Irish family who emigrated to Georgia and owned a plantation near the town of Jonesboro. Mrs. Stephens Mitchell's father also fought for the Confederate States of America in the Civil War; he then became a successful real estate developer during Reconstruction.

Eugene Mitchell and Maybelle Stephens Mitchell were politically prominent citizens of Atlanta. They were progressive, but in a conservative manner. They fought diligently in favor of issues such as public schools and women's suffrage, but they sent their own children to private schools and supported the poll tax. All of this economic and political family history played an integral role in the writing of *Gone with the Wind*.

From a young age, Mitchell was taught about the Civil War and reconstruction by her parents, grandparents, other relatives, and all of their friends. She would later recall "never . . . hearing, from my own people, anything sentimental or nostalgic about the old South. I read that sort of thing in books and poems and memoirs. I never heard it from

the survivors of that era” (Harwell 48). It was common at social gatherings in her family to sit in a room reliving battles and other moments during and after the War and wondering what would have been the outcome if those battles and events had happened differently. She heard the firsthand accounts of those relatives who had lived through the War and took a keen interest.

The Mitchells tried to ensure that through their learning about the War, their children (Margaret and her older brother, Alexander Stephens Mitchell) also learned character. At one point, when Margaret Mitchell expressed a desire to discontinue her formal education, Mrs. Mitchell took her for a drive to see “Sherman’s sentinels,” the chimneys left from plantations and other homes that had been burned during and after General William Tecumseh Sherman’s march through Georgia during the Civil War.

Mrs. Mitchell described the lives of those who had survived and

talked about the world those people had lived in, such a secure world, and how it had exploded beneath them. And she told me that my own world was going to explode under me, some day, and God help me if I didn’t have some weapon to meet the new world. . . . [S]he said all that would be left after a world ended would be what you could do with your hands and what you had in your head. (Farr 31)

As she approached adulthood, her parents made every effort to get her into Atlanta society. Much to the dismay of the entire family, Mitchell simply did not fit in with the other young ladies of her class. She found them to be trivial, simple-minded, and somewhat hypocritical. When Mitchell received no invitation to join the Junior League of Atlanta, she knew she would never be a prominent member of the debutante

society of Atlanta. This fact bothered her less than it did the rest of her family; she soon found that her place in Atlanta society – or lack thereof – made her very attractive to Atlanta's young men, thus making her more likely to find a good husband, something that was very important for young women at that time. After her graduation from Washington Seminary in 1918, she became engaged to Clifford Henry, a Harvard graduate and army lieutenant.

Henry was deployed to France in June of 1918 to fight in World War I, and Mitchell enrolled at Smith College that fall to study psychiatry. During Mitchell's freshman year at Smith, both Henry and Mrs. Stephens Mitchell died, and, after finishing the year with average grades, Margaret Mitchell returned home to be with her family and manage the household in her mother's place.

In 1922, much against the wishes of her family, Mitchell married Berrien "Red" Upshaw, a bootlegger. Mitchell and Upshaw lived in the Mitchell home during their short time together. After just three months, Upshaw left Mitchell. At this point, with the help of Mitchell and Upshaw's mutual friend (the best man at their wedding), John Marsh, Mitchell obtained a job writing for the *Atlanta Journal*. During the following period, Upshaw returned a few times, and Mitchell endured both physical and emotional abuse due to Upshaw's temper and alcoholism. After Marsh offered Upshaw a loan in 1924, Upshaw finally agreed to an uncontested divorce. In return, Mitchell agreed not to press assault charges against Upshaw. In 1925, Mitchell and Marsh were married. The two would remain married until Mitchell's death in 1949.

In 1926, Mitchell quit her job with the *Atlanta Journal* in order to stay home and be a full-time wife, primarily because of an ankle injury that would not heal properly.

During this time, she was unable to be active and ended up reading many books, a pastime she had loved from a young age. Eventually, when it seemed she had read every book in the Atlanta library, Marsh told her, “It looks to me, Peggy, as though you’ll have to write a book yourself if you’re to have anything to read” (Farr 78).

In writing her novel, Mitchell decided to write about the Civil War, preferring a subject with which she was familiar to one she would have to learn from the beginning. Still, a meticulous amount of research went into the writing of the novel. Mitchell read various diaries, memoirs, and historical accounts. She drew from the stories she had heard as a child, and she also conducted interviews with many war veterans and other survivors, using their stories to shape the plot of her novel.

Mitchell chose to set her story near the town of Jonesboro in Clayton County, Georgia, as well as within the city of Atlanta. Many of the novel’s key plot points were drawn from the real stories of Jonesboro, including childbirth in the midst of battle (there were two instances of this during the Battle of Jonesboro, one of which took place during an escape in a wagon), dresses made from drapes, and a family moving into a house that was only one-storied and that they could not afford to repair. Although Mitchell used these and other events to shape her novel, she asserted that her characters were her own invention and were only inspired by archetypes, despite many claims by others that the characters were based upon specific people. Mitchell also took great pains in her research to ensure that she used names that were authentic but that had never belonged to people who lived in the areas in which her story takes place.

By 1929, Mitchell had essentially finished her novel, minus a few chapters, and when life became busy for her, she put her manuscript away and all but forgot about it.

She worked on a few bits during 1930 and 1931, but by 1932, she had put it away completely. In 1935, Harold Latham of Macmillan began a literary scouting trip, starting in the South. In Atlanta, Latham met Margaret Mitchell Marsh, about whose manuscript he had heard. At a luncheon, he asked Mitchell if she had a manuscript he might see, to which she replied that she had nothing to show him. He heard about the manuscript from a few more people, asked Mitchell again, and received a similar response. It was only after a conversation with friends at tea that Mitchell decided to give her manuscript to Latham. She relates the experience thus:

He'd asked for [the manuscript], and I'd felt very flattered that he even considered me. And I'd refused, knowing in what poor shape the thing was. . . . [S]omebody asked me when I expected to get my book finished and why hadn't I given it to Mr. Latham. Then this child cried, 'Why are you writing a book, Peggy? How strange that you never said anything about it. Why didn't you give it to Mr. Latham?' I said I hadn't because it was so lousy I was ashamed of it. To which she replied . . . 'Well, I daresay. Really, I wouldn't take you for the type who would write a successful book. You know you don't take life seriously enough to be a novelist. . . . I guess you are wasting your time trying. You really aren't the type. . . . Well, suddenly, I got so mad . . . that I grabbed up what manuscript I could lay hands on . . . and I posted down to the hotel and caught Mr. Latham as he was about to leave to catch his train.'" (Farr 94)

The manuscript was in incomplete, unprofessional shape, but Latham bought a new suitcase just to carry it and began reading it on his way to New Orleans. While

reading, he realized that the manuscript was, in his own words, “something of tremendous importance” (Farr 94). The next day, Latham received a telegram from an embarrassed Mitchell begging him to send the manuscript back. Latham assured Mitchell, however, that Macmillan would understand the condition of the manuscript and persuaded her to allow him to submit it to the company. Latham took the manuscript back to Macmillan, who promptly offered Mitchell a contract. In May of 1936, the first advance copies of *Gone with the Wind* were released.

III. Reception

The critical reaction to *Gone with the Wind* was mixed. Though there were both glowing and scathing reviews, the general tone of initial critical reviews was “not great, but competent,” with many critics using those exact words at various points in their reviews. Because of the rising popularity of the “New Criticism” as a way of analyzing literature, many critics cited Mitchell’s simplistic, straightforward writing style as one of the novel’s chief faults. In his review for *New Statesman & Nation*, Peter Quennell describes Mitchell’s style as “extremely banal” (*Book Review Digest* 683). I. M. Patterson of *Books* wrote, “The writing is redundant and devoid of distinction; Miss Mitchell is apt to make two words grow where even one would be superfluous” (*Book Review Digest* 682). Many critics also felt that at 1,037 pages, the book was too long. In general, however, the novel was praised even by the most negative of critics for its historical accuracy (at the time, it was thought to be meticulously accurate) and for its rich plot and characters. In a review for *Boston Transcript*, D. L. Mann wrote, “In its historical background as well as in its treatment of character this book is a very noteworthy achievement, and Scarlett O’Hara is a heroine to be long remembered” (*Book Review Digest* 682). These strengths were further emphasized by experts of the time. In another review, historian Henry Steele Commager wrote of the novel’s not “ruffling [his] historical feather” (Harwell 39). In fact, the primary historical quibble that critics of that time brought against the novel involved the use of certain words and terms that seemed anachronistic, but in letters, Mitchell provided research to defend her use of those terms.

Meanwhile, Dr. Charles E. Mayos, a psychiatrist, praised the novel's "accurate description of human emotions" (Harwell 55). Despite the mixed criticism, the novel went on to win the 1936 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

The response of the general public, however, was not so varied; the book was a sensational bestseller, with sales surpassing the hopes of even the most optimistic of people. Malcolm Cowley humorously described the novel as "going like the wind" (*Book Review Digest* 682). Readers everywhere fell in love with the novel and its characters, and many wrote Mitchell to tell her so.

The only major negative response from the general public came from those on the far left end of the political spectrum, whose primary complaints were about Mitchell's not covering in greater depth themes of economics, sociology, and mass movements. In her defense, Mitchell wrote in letters to friends that her novel was not intended to be any sort of propaganda and was meant to be told from Scarlett's point of view – the point of view of a contemporary experiencing the events, not the point of view of an omniscient narrator looking back with a sense of irony. In Mitchell's words, "the whole book was written through Scarlett's eyes. What she understood was written down; what she did not understand – and there were many things beyond her comprehension, they were left to the reader's imagination, even as they were left to Scarlett's" (Harwell 102).

Other leftist groups and some African American groups condemned the novel for the racial stereotypes it presented. Many were offended by the portrayal of the black characters in the novel, particularly because of the use of dialect. If Mitchell is to be believed, however, this was not the most widely-accepted view among African Americans. In a letter to Herschel Brickell, she writes:

They referred to the book as an ‘incendiary and negro baiting’ book.

Personally I do not know where they get such an idea for, as far as I can see, most of the negro characters were people of worth, dignity and rectitude—certainly Mammy and Peter and even the ignorant [meaning socially uneducated] Sam knew more of decorous behavior and honor than Scarlett did. . . . [M]y friends are continually telling me what colored elevator operators, garage attendants, etc., tell them and these colored people seem well pleased. (Harwell 139)

The validity of such arguments can be debated, of course. African Americans in the South during that time often had little choice but to say what whites wanted to hear. Still, it is important to note that although the novel is certainly racist by modern standards, it was not considered racist by most people in its own time. This simple fact indicates a general acceptance of the racial standards of the day (and not just in the South) as well as passivity where civil rights were concerned (especially compared to the active movement that would sweep the nation about twenty-five years later).

Mitchell herself was overwhelmed by the success of her novel. She had felt that her work was sloppy, simplistic, and everything else the critics accused it of being in terms of style, and she feared few people would enjoy it. The monumental sensation caused by the novel astounded her. She found herself an instant celebrity, a status she did not enjoy, though she did enjoy responding to letters concerning her novel and its reception from the privacy of her own home. She was a quiet person who enjoyed her privacy, and the sudden fame brought on by the book took a toll upon her health.

IV. Literary Analysis

The following four analyses explore the themes of change, gender, sexuality, and race as they appear in *Gone with the Wind*. In each section, I will explore the novel's treatment of the issue and compare that treatment to the views and values of the 1930s, using the above historical context as a background and the novel's popularity as evidence for my claims. Although Margaret Mitchell was writing for her own enjoyment when she created the plot of *Gone with the Wind*, she was a woman of her time – in some ways, ahead of her time – and her work provides insight into the thoughts and feelings of many Americans during that period.

Change

Margaret Mitchell herself said, “If *Gone with the Wind* has a central theme, I suppose it is the theme of survival” (*PBS.org*). While Mitchell underestimated the presence of several significant themes in her novel, survival is certainly one of the most important. Specifically, *Gone with the Wind* is about survival in the face of catastrophe and upheaval, things with which most Depression-era readers would have been familiar. In the words of Mitchell,

What quality is it that makes some people able to survive catastrophes and others, apparently just as brave and able and strong, go under? . . . We've all seen the same thing happen in the present depression. It happens in every social upheaval,

in wars, in panics, in revolutions. . . . I suppose, some people survive disasters. Others do not. What qualities are in those people who fight their way through triumphantly — that are lacking in those who do go under? What was it that made our Southern people able to come through a war, a Reconstruction and the complete wrecking of all our social and economic systems? I don't know. I only know that the survivors of the Civil war used to call that quality "gumption."

(PBS.org)

Mitchell accurately claimed, "Heaven knows I didn't foresee the Depression and try to write a novel paralleling it, in another day. I was writing about an upheaval I'd heard about when I was a small child" (Harwell 13).

Nevertheless, the upheaval experienced by Mitchell's characters bears strong similarities to the Depression. With that in mind, it becomes easy to see why readers would have an easy time connecting with the story. The Jazz Age had been their blissful antebellum world; they enjoyed its fruits and tried to ignore its glaring flaws and convince themselves it could last forever. The stock market crash was their Civil War — more sudden and less dramatic, perhaps, but it still meant the end of their material wealth. The Depression and the New Deal were their Reconstruction; with a desperate longing for the past, they faced a bleak future. Scarlett's determination and her ending declaration that "'tomorrow is another day'" (Mitchell 959) might have been a source of inspiration to readers.

The circumstances of the novel could hardly have been so relatable to readers without Mitchell's complex, dynamic characters. The ways in which Scarlett, Rhett, Ashley, Melanie, Mammy, and others experience and respond to the changes around

them are the driving force of the novel. Because the characters were a general point of praise among critics and, in the words of the previously referenced Dr. Charles Mayos, conveyed an “accurate description of human emotions” (Harwell 55) and because of the immense complexity of the plot, I will continue my exploration of the novel’s themes of change and survival using character studies of several of the major characters.

* * *

Scarlett

Scarlett O’Hara is, of course, the well-known protagonist of *Gone with the Wind*, and the novel follows her life through the war and Reconstruction. As such, she will have the longest and most in-depth character analysis. From the start of the novel, Scarlett is a vibrant, outspoken character with a short temper. Although she can play the part, she is the very antithesis of everything a Southern lady is meant to be. Mitchell writes:

[F]or all the modesty of her spreading skirts, the demureness of hair netted smoothly into a chignon and the quietness of small white hands folded in her lap, her true self was poorly concealed. The green eyes in the carefully sweet face were turbulent, willful, lusty with life, distinctly at variance with her decorous demeanor. (Mitchell 25)

She has no female friends, for “[t]o her, all women, including her two sisters, were natural enemies in pursuit of the same prey—man” (Mitchell 77). As a child, “her preferred playmates were . . . the negro children on the plantation and the boys of the neighborhood” (Mitchell 75). When she is older, she keeps company with the young men of the community, flirting and teasing them but always keeping them at arm’s length.

She is self-centered, “for she could never long endure any conversation of which she was not the chief subject,” (Mitchell 27) and always expects to get her way. She does not possess the ability to analyze and understand others, nor does she care to do so. She is capricious, acting on every whim, even going so far as to marry Charles Hamilton simply to make Ashley jealous. When Charles dies, her only thought is “‘God only knows . . . matrons never have any fun at all. So widows might as well be dead’” (Mitchell 144).

From the start, it is clear that Scarlett’s mind is her greatest asset. Although her education is “sketchy,” she has a “sharp intelligence” and learns to imitate the graces of a lady to hide her inner self (Mitchell 75). She possesses little understanding of others, but she knows how to make the most of her expected role in society and exploit it to her benefit. She has an aptitude for mathematics that is considered shameful for a belle. Her father even “drifted into a habit of treating her in a man-to-man manner” (Mitchell 49-50).

Scarlett’s strong will, independent nature, and transcendence of societal conventions (especially where gender is concerned) make her an embodiment of 1920s and 1930s feminist values. More than that, though, she displays the hardness, determination, and work ethic necessary to survive an economic collapse like Reconstruction or the Depression. Throughout the novel, she adapts to the changes around her in a manner that is similar to the adaptations her readers had to make.

Before the start of the war, Scarlett’s only real awareness of the world around her is a recognition (without any concern) that she does not fit in with the other young ladies her age. Once the war begins and the young widow travels to Atlanta to live with

Melanie, however, her many conversations with Rhett begin to awaken within her a cynical understanding of the society around her. She begins to see the war as a waste of time and money and notices the hypocrisies of the Southern society and of the aristocratic people in it. She begins to realize – albeit vaguely – that “the Cause,” though it is treated as a sacred term to represent everything the South stands for, is really a vague, abstract concept that few people around her truly understand. Everyone knows buzzwords associated with it – words such as “slavery” and “states’ rights,” but nobody seems to think much about it. Her early cynicism and disillusionment would have resonated with readers who experienced the collapse that ushered in the 1930s and understood, in hindsight, the moral problems that had plagued their society – problems that everyone had tried to ignore. At this point, Scarlett begins her pattern of openly (as opposed to secretly) defying society’s expectations of her. She dances with Rhett at the a fundraising bazaar even though she is in mourning, she continues to talk to Rhett even when the rest of Atlanta ostracizes him, and she comes out of mourning long before it is socially acceptable for her to do so. During this time, she becomes more self-confident and independent. When helping her escape a burning Atlanta in a cart with Melanie, Melanie’s newborn son Beau, Scarlett’s own son Wade, and the maid Prissy, Rhett remarks “‘Anyone as selfish and determined as you are is never helpless. God help the Yankees if they should get you’” (Mitchell 373). As cynical and dark as this remark sounds, Mitchell’s readers would have recognized the importance of these qualities in the face of the tragedy Scarlett was yet to endure because of their own experience in dealing with economic hardships.

Once Scarlett returns to Tara and discovers the terrible living conditions there, she undergoes her greatest change. While scavenging for food at Twelve Oaks, she drops to the ground weeping. Mitchell writes that “[w]hen she arose at last . . . her head was raised high and something that was youth and beauty and potential tenderness had gone out of her face forever. . . . [S]he had settled her own mind and her own life” (Mitchell 407). It is at this point that, hungry and bitter, Scarlett makes her famous declaration to herself:

“As God is my witness, as God is my witness, the Yankees aren’t going to lick me. I’m going to live through this, and when it’s over, I’m never going to be hungry again. No, nor any of my folks. If I have to steal or kill—as God is my witness, I’m never going to be hungry again.”

(Mitchell 408)

Following this major shift, Scarlett becomes shrewd and stingy, and she encourages her family and servants to do the same. She divides the harsh manual labor among every able body in the house (including herself), and she rations out the food. As Gerald descends into mental illness, Scarlett becomes the head of the household and manages to keep herself, Melanie, Beau, Wade, Gerald, Suellen, Carreen, Mammy, Pork, Prissy, Dilcey, and Dilcey’s infant child alive. At one point, when a Union deserter is looting the house, she takes a pistol and kills him. Afterward, she and Melanie take his wallet and other valuables and hide the body before anyone else in the house can learn what happened. Many people during the Depression – especially those in rural areas – had taken similar measures in their own survival (with the exception of murder) and would have understood the importance of Scarlett’s newfound harshness and bitterness.

When Scarlett learns that she owes three hundred dollars in back taxes on Tara, she discovers a deeper level of her desperate and conniving side. She travels to Atlanta to procure the money from Rhett, even offering to be his mistress. When he refuses her, she charms her sister's fiancé, Frank Kennedy, who is now running a semi-successful store in Atlanta. He falls for her charms and marries her, and for the second time, Scarlett is married to a man she does not love to accomplish her own ends. Scarlett begins to help Frank manage his accounts, gradually taking more and more control. Eventually, she has him buy a lumber mill, and she starts her own lumber business in Atlanta. Because of her ability to work with numbers and her swift acquisition of shrewd business skills, her enterprise is highly successful, but all of Atlanta society frowns upon the idea of a woman working in business. Scarlett decides that she does not care what others think of her as long as she is acquiring money. Her fear of returning to poverty drives her to do whatever it takes to set up security for herself and for her beloved home.

At her father's funeral, Scarlett's philosophy toward life and survival becomes more clearly defined through a lecture delivered to her by an elderly neighbor, Grandma Fontaine:

“We bow to the inevitable. . . . We aren't a stiff-necked tribe. . . . When trouble comes we bow to the inevitable without any mouthing, and we work and we smile and we bide our time. And we play along with lesser folks and we take what we can get from them. And when we're strong enough, we kick the folks whose necks we've climbed over. That, my child, is the secret of survival. . . . We hear how you suck up to the Yankees and the white trash and the new-rich carpetbaggers to get money

out of them. . . . Well, go to it, I say. And get every cent out of them you can, but when you've got enough money, kick them in the face, because they can't serve you any longer." (Mitchell 670-71)

Scarlett continues to follow this advice throughout the rest of the novel. Many readers, regardless of whether or not they agreed with this philosophy, would have understood from experience Scarlett's situation and the thoughts and feelings that lead her to this conclusion.

After Frank dies and Scarlett marries Rhett, she finds herself with more money than she knows how to spend. She spends lavishly with no regard to taste in an effort to remind herself that she now has plenty of money and to cause herself to feel secure. She continues to run her lumber business for fun, and she looks down upon the Old Southern gentry who had formerly looked down upon her. However, when she begins to break ties with her less "respectable" friends, she finds herself alone, and Melanie, loyal to a fault, becomes her only link to society. Scarlett is accepted simply for Melanie's sake, and she uses her situation to flaunt her wealth and success before all of Atlanta society. Eventually, after losing Melanie, Ashley, and Rhett in one day, she comes to the conclusion that although she survived the war and Reconstruction and now has plenty of money, she is completely alone and worse off than those who only gained moderate wealth and ended up as middle-class workers but maintained their sense of community and their principles. She concludes that they, like her, have adapted to the new order of things, but they have not lost themselves in the process, a concept that would have been an inspiration to those who had had their whole lives changed by the Depression. Still,

not to be defeated, Scarlett becomes determined to win Rhett back and regain what she has lost, declaring to herself “tomorrow is another day” (Mitchell 959).

Melanie

Melanie is Scarlett’s polar opposite, and Mitchell said of her, “[S]he is really my heroine, not ‘Scarlett’” (Harwell 15). Despite her lack of outward beauty, Melanie is the epitome of a Southern lady. Even when all other Southern “ladies” fall short of what they are meant to be, Melanie fulfills every requirement from the heart. She always looks for the best in people, including Scarlett. When Scarlett marries Charles, Melanie excitedly tells her new sister-in-law, “‘Now, we’re really and truly sisters’” (Mitchell 140). Throughout the novel, she is fiercely loyal to Scarlett, defending her from every attack brought against her. She admires Scarlett’s will to survive and her independent spirit; to an extent, she even emulates these qualities, but in her own way. Melanie is portrayed as an entirely selfless character. Whereas Scarlett is ruled by her brain, Melanie is ruled by her heart, a reminder to readers that even though determination is necessary for survival, compassion is equally necessary.

From the start, Melanie possesses a keen awareness of what is happening in society, even if that awareness is obscured by her generous nature. She never notices the hypocrisy of those around her, but she still disagrees with choices that are made. She has opinions, and she expresses them, but she always chooses the publically acceptable way to do so. She displays many of the qualities admired by feminists of Mitchell’s time, though not to the same extent as Scarlett. At the bazaar, for instance, when Scarlett, in order to seem devoted to “the Cause,” makes a remark about the soldiers present looking “fine,” Melanie replies, “‘Most of them would look a lot finer in gray uniforms and in

Virginia,' . . . and she did not trouble to lower her voice" (Mitchell 182). Melanie defends Scarlett's actions at the bazaar and continues to receive Rhett when he is ostracized by the rest of Atlanta, refusing to allow his reputation to besmirch her good opinion of him. Because of her generous, selfless nature and her clear devotion to the South, the society women of Atlanta are willing to accept her actions, even when they will not accept Scarlett's similar actions.

During the period of poverty in which the inhabitants of Tara narrowly avoid starvation, Melanie, despite her frail condition, gives more of herself to contribute to the family's survival than anyone save Scarlett. Although everyone is dependent upon Scarlett's keen mind and survival instincts, Melanie becomes a maternal figure to the family (including Scarlett, though Scarlett does not realize it). She supplies their emotional needs and provides motivation to keep going that is much more positive than Scarlett's cold harshness. Whereas Scarlett is the embodiment of Depression-era feminism, Melanie is the embodiment of the "cult of motherhood" that was widespread during the 1930s. She is not without her own sense of shrewdness, however; she helps Scarlett take the dead Union deserter's valuables and hide his body, and she is proud of Scarlett for having shot him. During this time, Melanie develops a deep admiration for Scarlett's courage and determination and begins to exhibit those qualities to a greater degree than she previously had. When Union soldiers set fire to the kitchen, Melanie works side-by-side with Scarlett to put the fire out.

After things improve at Tara, Melanie and Ashley move to a modest house in Atlanta to continue to be near Scarlett and to start a home of their own. Back in her home city, Melanie becomes the center of "respectable" Atlanta society. She is the paragon of

Southern virtue, clinging to the old values and customs more steadfastly than anyone else while also adapting to the changes going on around her. While Scarlett is an example of the independence necessary to survive tragedy, Melanie displays the vital role of community in survival. The sense of community allows the characters' cultural identity, the chief source of their sense of purpose, to survive along with their physical bodies. The women, for example, band together in keeping their core values alive by decorating Confederate graves and hosting social events that are reminiscent of past times. Despite their difference in philosophy, however, Melanie maintains her loyalty to Scarlett and continues to defend her against all criticism. She offers justification for Scarlett's role in business and continues to admire her independent spirit. Although she often cautions Scarlett concerning her choices, she always has a childlike faith that Scarlett is doing what is best.

Ultimately, Melanie manages to adapt to the new order of things and yet still remains inwardly unchanged by the tragedy that has occurred around her. She is as compassionate, loving, and hospitable as ever – an example of how these qualities may seem like weakness but are actually necessary to survive. Her survival is, of course, largely due to Scarlett's hard work and determination, but Scarlett learns that she, in turn, survived only because of Melanie's calm inner strength and grace. Even on her deathbed, Melanie thinks only of others, asking Scarlett to take care of Ashley and Beau, but stressing, "[D]on't ever let him know" (Mitchell 935). Her final request of Scarlett, however, is for Scarlett's own benefit. "Captain Butler," she says, "be kind to him. He—loves you so" (Mitchell 936).

Ashley

Because Scarlett is unable to understand Ashley, there is little to be learned of him except what he tells readers about himself. At the start of the novel, Ashley is portrayed as the ideal Southern gentleman. He is reserved and level-headed in a community “where everyone said exactly what he thought as soon as he thought it” (Mitchell 46). Although he is somewhat of a misfit in the rural community of the novel because of his pursuit of education and knowledge and his love of art, literature, and music, he still holds steadfastly to the Old Southern ideals of honor and chivalry. He would sooner do what is expected of him – marrying Melanie, for example – than dishonor himself and those around him by pursuing a selfish endeavor. Ashley is a voice of reason where the impending war is concerned, stating that he will fight if Georgia goes to war but that he would rather work things out with the Union peacefully if at all possible.

During the war, Ashley is all but absent from the story. He sends a fatalistic letter to Melanie (which Scarlett reads) expressing his disillusionment with the South and “the Cause.” He writes:

“[We] are fighting for a Cause that was lost the minute the first shot was fired, for our Cause is really our own way of living and that is gone already. . . . That this could happen to us all, this wrecking of old ways, this bloody slaughter and hate! Melanie, nothing is worth it—States’ Rights, nor slaves, nor cotton. Nothing is worth what is happening to us now and what may happen, for if the Yankees whip us the future will be one of incredible horror. And, my dear, they may yet whip us. . . . We

should have paid heed to cynics like Butler who knew, instead of statesmen who felt—and talked.” (Mitchell 212-13)

Ashley’s disillusionment, much like Scarlett’s, would have been relatable to readers during the Depression, and many would have identified with his loss of hope.

When he returns to Tara from the war, he joins the rest of the household in manual labor, but it becomes clear that he has lost all sense of purpose. “I am fitted for nothing in this world,” he tells Scarlett, “for the world I belonged in has gone” (Mitchell 496). Ashley, an artistic soul with no practical knowledge, is left feeling helpless and unable to cope with reality, feelings that will stay with him through the rest of the novel, even as he learns to live with them. He says that he had created his own dream world and that the war had forced him to face the real world while robbing him of his dream world forever. Like many who experienced the stock market crash of 1929, Ashley found his identity in the blissful world in which he had lived, and once that world is gone, his sense of self disappears as well. Even in the midst of this situation, however, Ashley maintains his principles and his sense of honor – the only remnants of the old order he still has. Eventually, unwilling to face reality and clinging to a code that does not work in the new way of life, Ashley becomes entirely dependent upon Melanie for purpose and for emotional survival while Scarlett takes much of the responsibility for his material survival. Like Melanie, Ashley clings to the old values and traditions, but unlike Melanie, he is unable to adapt to fit a new way of life, demonstrating to readers the dangers of trying to continue on as if there were no change happening around them. By the end, Ashley, a pure embodiment of the Old South, has all but faded away and is overshadowed by Melanie, the spirit of the Old South adapting to the New.

Rhett

Rhett, like Ashley, is largely misunderstood by Scarlett. He explains his own ideals and views more fully than Ashley does, but it is difficult for readers to read his true personality through all of his cynicism. Rhett holds a spirit of bitter contempt towards traditional Southern society, an example of disillusionment brought to a dangerous extreme. He frequently criticizes Ashley (in conversations with Scarlett) for his blind devotion to dying principles and for his inability to adapt to a changing world. It is he who first points out the hypocrisies and failings in the society to Scarlett and who encourages her to defy society's expectations and do as she pleases. For his part, Rhett has no qualms about doing as he pleases regardless of the opinions of society. "Until you've lost your reputation," he tells her, "you never realize what a burden it was or what freedom really is" (Mitchell 196). He also has no qualms about using the war to make his fortune, taking advantage of the fact that "there is just as much money to be made out of the wreckage of a civilization as from the upbuilding of one" (Mitchell 196). Like Scarlett, Rhett has a keen understanding of economics and uses it to his advantage. Rhett's blunt expression of his cynical ideas may have been an outlet for readers to release similar thoughts and feelings, but he also displays the dangers of such thinking.

After safely escorting Scarlett out of Atlanta, Rhett seems to have a sudden change in heart. He decides to join the Confederate militia in defending Atlanta from General Sherman's invasion. He claims that he leaves to fight "[b]ecause, perhaps of the betraying sentimentality that lurks in all of us Southerners. Perhaps—perhaps because I am ashamed. . . . I am annoyed at myself to find that so much quixoticism still lingers in

me. But our fair Southland needs every man”” (Mitchell 373). Mitchell also gives the possibility that this turnaround may be prompted by ulterior motives, however, by having Rhett proudly say, “”Think how our troops will be heartened by my eleventh-hour appearance”” (Mitchell 373). His service does, in fact, cause some social redemption for him years later when he wants it.

After the war, he continues in his cynicism and his defiance of Southern culture. He marries Scarlett and then undergoes a profound change after the birth of their daughter. Having a child melts much of his cynicism, and he decides he wants what is best for her. He dotes upon her and does everything within his power to insinuate his way back into “respectable” society. Conveniently, the story of his bravado in defending begins circulating at this time. He still expresses contempt for Southern society in private, but much like Scarlett in the early part of the novel, he now has a desire to fit in and act the part of the Southern gentleman to accomplish his own goals. After Bonnie’s death, he seems to become truly lost; his cynicism, contempt, and manipulation of others have proved to be self-destructive, making him a caution to readers who may have found his philosophy tempting. He has come to a similar conclusion as Scarlett concerning the importance of community and values. He still has contempt for the society that embraces these things, but he wants to pursue them nonetheless. Much like Ashley, Rhett desires to return to the old ways, but unlike Ashley, he knows how to survive in the New South while still upholding the Old South ideals.

* * *

Readers who experienced the Depression could easily relate to the account of Reconstruction depicted in the novel and to the characters Mitchell had created. Like

Ashley, many felt a longing for the prosperous way of life that was now gone, but through Ashley, they could see the importance of moving forward despite their nostalgic longings. Some were able to identify with Rhett in his contempt for a flawed society whose arrogance was its chief downfall while also noting the dangers of taking that contempt too far. Scarlett's determination and indomitable spirit may have been a source of inspiration for many, but readers were also given the example of Melanie to balance that of Scarlett, emphasizing that while adaptation is necessary, true survival involves adapting while still clinging to one's morals and principles.

Gender

Throughout *Gone with the Wind*, Mitchell depicts the gender roles of the Civil War era in a way that reflects the values of her own time, largely because of the similarity between the Depression and Mitchell's description of Reconstruction. While Mitchell's intent was to create a realistic portrayal of the nineteenth-century gender roles, many of the gender-related values in the novel rang true for readers in the 1930s. Although the feminist movement was not as strong as it had been in the previous decade, many were beginning to see the importance of women having a more active role in society because of the rough economic conditions. At the same time, the "cult of motherhood" involved a deeper appreciation for the individuals who brought their homes and families through the trials of the Depression within the household. Both of these ideas are reflected in *Gone with the Wind*, largely through the roles of Scarlett, Melanie, Mammy, and Ellen. Likewise, the novel's portrayals of male characters such as Rhett, Ashley, and Frank are indicative of society's expectations of men, exploring the ideas of masculinity, strength, and virtue.

Most of the women in *Gone with the Wind* come across as strong and determined individuals with the will to survive, and it is the women who bring the South through the aftermath of the Civil War. Scarlett, as I stated before, is a paragon of the ideals of Depression-era feminism because of her independence and her transcendence of society's expectations. She learns how to portray the outward airs and graces of a lady. She learns to appear simple-minded, delicate, and emotionally weak by hiding her intelligence and understanding when conversing with other men, wearing physically uncomfortable (sometimes even painful) clothing, moving in a way that causes physical discomfort but creates visual appeal, denying hunger, and feigning an overwhelming display of emotion – all in the aims of finding a husband. The novel gives many detailed descriptions of what this task involved, such as the following:

She knew how to smile so that her dimples leaped, how to walk pigeon-toed so that her wide hoop skirts swayed entrancingly, how to look up into a man's face and then drop her eyes and bat the lids rapidly so that she seemed a-tremble with gentle emotion. Most of all she learned how to conceal from men a sharp intelligence beneath a face as sweet and bland as a baby's. (Mitchell 75)

The man owned the property, and the woman managed it. The man took the credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness. The man roared like a bull when a splinter was in his finger, and the woman muffled the moans of childbirth, lest she disturb him. (Mitchell 75)

Instructions from Ellen and Mammy give further details concerning these expectations:

“You must be more gentle, dear, more sedate. . . . You must not interrupt gentlemen when they are speaking, even if you do think you know more about matters than they do. Gentlemen do not like forward girls.”

(Mitchell 75-76)

“Young misses whut frowns an’ pushes out dey chins an’ says ‘Ah will’ an’ ‘Ah woan’ mos’ gener’ly doan ketch husbands. . . . Young misses should cas’ down dey eyes an’ say, ‘Well, suh, Ah mout’ an’ ‘Jes’ as you say, suh.’” (Mitchell 76)

“Ah has tole you an’ tole you dat you kin allus tell a lady by dat she eat lak a bird.” (Mitchell 93)

Scarlett, of course, does not subscribe to any of these ideas, and she eventually refuses to follow them outwardly except when they are useful to her. In Scarlett’s society, women are appreciated for being beautiful, simple-minded, quiet, gentle, and submissive. Scarlett fights against these expectations and chooses to set a new standard for womanhood by asserting her abilities, independence, and intelligence and by entering the world of men through work, ideals that were central to the feminist movement of the 1920s. Although Scarlett becomes a pariah for her efforts, Melanie continually admires her and emulates her in a selfless, socially acceptable way. The general tone of the novel (largely based upon Scarlett’s perception) indicates that Scarlett’s position is usually right, except when taken to extremes, and that society’s expectations of women are unfair, degrading, and superficial. Mammy expresses agreement with this last point. When Scarlett asks, “‘Why is it a girl has to be so silly to catch a husband?’” her response is, “‘Ah specs it’s kase gempmums doan know whut dey wants. Dey jes’ knows whut dey thinks dey wants’” (Mitchell 95). These ideas were especially relevant in a

time when women were becoming more assertive of their own rights, strengths, and competence.

Despite her dislike for society's expectations of women, Scarlett possesses a deep admiration for her mother, who meets every expectation perfectly. In Scarlett's eyes, Ellen is the personification of womanhood:

Ellen O'Hara was different, and Scarlett regarded her as something holy and apart from all the rest of humankind. When Scarlett was a child, she had confused her mother with the Virgin Mary, and now that she was older she saw no reason for changing her opinion. To her, Ellen represented the utter security that only Heaven or a mother can give. She knew that her mother was the embodiment of justice, truth, loving tenderness and profound wisdom—a great lady. (Mitchell 77)

Ellen carries out every virtue associated with the “cult of motherhood” without complaint. Even the seemingly perfect Ellen, however, is not altogether pleased with her lot in life. In one of the rare instances in which the narrator becomes omniscient for a moment, readers learn that “Ellen's life was not easy, nor was it happy, but she did not expect life to be easy, and, if it was not happy, that was woman's lot. It was a man's world, and she accepted it as such” (Mitchell 74-75).

Of course, the war changes everything, and although ladies are still expected to show the same outward graces they previously had, competence and work ethic become more valuable. At this point, Scarlett comes into her own; with Ellen dead and Gerald's mental health failing, she manages what is left of Tara. She divides the work, taking the heaviest load upon herself both physically and mentally, and she rations the food, giving

everyone an equal share. When major decisions have to be made, Scarlett is the one who makes them. In essence, Scarlett becomes the man of the home. This acceptance of authority and work would have resonated not only with feminists, but with any who came to understand the power and importance of women as a result of the Depression.

Melanie comes into her own after the war as well, and if Scarlett is the man of the house at Tara, Melanie is the woman of the house. In a way more heartfelt, less formal, and less legalistic than Ellen, Melanie embodies and even transcends the ideals of the “cult of motherhood.” She is a mother figure to all at Tara, including Scarlett. She balances out Scarlett’s harshness with compassion. Like Scarlett, she is willing to give every ounce of energy she possesses to help provide for the family.

Before the war, the Southern culture emphasizes the importance of strong male figures. The ideal Southern world is a making of the dreams of men; everything is meant to fit their liking. The culture places a high value upon masculinity; the expectation is that a man treat ladies as objects of worship when in public, respect his own dignity and the dignity of other men, defend his beliefs with his life without hesitation, and display an unerring devotion to the South. Men are also expected to take extreme interest in “masculine” activities such as hunting, horse riding, gambling, drinking, and smoking. The ideal Southern gentleman seems like a perfect protagonist for any work of Depression-era fiction and resembles characters played by actors such as Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, or Jimmy Stewart. Most of the male characters in the novel fill all of these requirements, but they appear as simple individuals who are easy for Scarlett to manipulate. Ashley and Rhett, however, are less pliable, and while each is lacking in one of the above areas – Rhett has no devotion to the South, and Ashley is more interested in

literature and art than the “masculine” pursuits of other men – they are presented as ideals of manhood.

While the women gain power and independence throughout the novel, the men seem to lose it. Many men, like Ashley, return from war broken and purposeless. They find that the world they left has learned to survive without them, and they are left feeling that they have no place. Others refuse to accept the end of the war and continue on as if it were still going, committing acts of defiance against the Union and forming political groups to try to revive the dying Old South. Most learn, however, that the only thing to be done is to cherish the past in memory but to move on in a new way of life, a lesson learned by many in the 1930s as well.

By the end, the men are the primary authority figures in society again, but there is a new appreciation for the strength and mind of a woman. No longer is the South a deluded, superficial land of powerful men and their adoring, simple-minded women; it is a place where a woman’s support is necessary to sustain a family and her role is recognized and where a man’s masculinity is defined by his ability to provide for his family rather than to uphold pretenses. Each of the central characters fills his or her new role in a different way. Scarlett carries her power farther than society is willing to accept, and she becomes ostracized. Rhett likewise overextends his assertiveness and his ability to provide (through manipulation) to the point of self-destruction. Ashley, meanwhile, loses his sense of masculinity, and the women in his life have to fill that role for him. Melanie fills the new requirements of womanhood without losing her old values, but she still depends on Scarlett’s harshness for survival at times. Each character conveys the

values and feelings of Depression-era readers in some way, and each serves as both an example and a caution at various points in the story.

Sexuality

While *Gone with the Wind* contains few overt sexual references, Mitchell uses the circumstances of her story to explore human sexuality in a subtle way. The story itself may portray the ideals of the nineteenth-century South, but the way in which it is written reflects Mitchell's own approach toward sexuality. If the popular response is any indicator, many others besides Mitchell took a similar approach in thinking and talking about sexuality. From this stance, the book's references to sexuality – considered risqué at the time – and the roundabout way in which sexuality is handled can provide insight to the sexual ideas of the 1930s.

Scarlett is more open about her sexuality than the women around her (with the exception of the prostitute Belle Watling), and her sexual openness plays a major role in her rebellion against the society around her. Much like the sex symbols of Mitchell's day (Mae West, for instance), Scarlett possesses a keen awareness of her sexual charms, a willingness to use those charms to get her way, and a sense of contempt for the sexual repression in her society. These qualities are evident from the beginning of the story. In her opening description of Scarlett, Mitchell describes some of her protagonist's physical features commonly associated with sexuality and the way Scarlett intentionally emphasizes those physical features: "The dress set off to perfection the seventeen-inch waist, the smallest in three counties, and the tightly fitting basque showed breasts well matured for her sixteen years" (Mitchell 25). Later, when she is choosing a dress to wear

to the barbecue at Twelve Oaks, she chooses a dress that “was not suitable for a barbecue, for it had only tiny puffed sleeves and the neck was low enough for a dancing dress” (Mitchell 91). In a total disregard for social prohibitions, Scarlett decides “there was nothing else to do but to wear it. After all she was not ashamed of her neck and arms and bosom, even if it was not correct to show them in the morning” (Mitchell 91). Mammy is appalled. Scarlett’s way of expressing her sexuality is not unlike the repressed yet emerging sexual awareness that was prevalent during the 1930s.

It is worth noting, however, that despite the society’s strict restrictions concerning modesty, the most revealing dresses were to be worn when a woman would be in the closest contact with men. In fact, there are several instances in which Mitchell implies that the Southern society is not as puritanical as it pretends to be. In the opening paragraph of chapter thirteen, Mitchell briefly mentions that the local newspaper includes advertisements for abortifacients (Mitchell 234). In a society that considers it inappropriate to even mention dysentery in front of women, such an advertisement seems bold and carries the implication that the society is not as puritanical as it pretends to be. The character of Belle Watling, Atlanta’s most notorious prostitute, is another hint at the secret sexual side of Southern society. Every Southern man has a pretense of being faithful to his wife or his sweetheart, but somehow Belle stays in business. This society, with its strict moral values juxtaposed with its secret sexuality, bears a strong resemblance to the society of the 1930s, which also seemed to have strong values but which had its own hidden sexual practices.

Scarlett's sexual desires are a central aspect of the novel's exploration of sexuality. Scarlett's first kiss with Ashley, while tame compared to others, is portrayed with a degree of passion and sensuality:

His arms went around her gently, and he bent his head to her face. At the first touch of his lips on hers, her arms were about his neck in a strangling grip. For a fleeting immeasurable instant, he pressed her body close to his.

Then she felt a sudden tensing of all his muscles. (Mitchell 270)

This first kiss occurs during the war while Ashley is visiting Atlanta on furlough. Their next kiss takes place after the war during the period of poverty and hunger at Tara and is more erotic than the first:

There was a curious low roaring sound in her ears as of sea shells held against them and through the sound she dimly heard the swift thudding of her heart. Her body seemed to melt into his and, for a timeless time, they stood fused together as his lips took hers hungrily as if he could never have enough. (Mitchell 502)

Mitchell's exploration of Scarlett's sexual desires reflects the public's growing acceptance of the sexual desires of women in general, something that had previously been unacknowledged.

The deepest view of sexuality is presented through Scarlett's tempestuous relationship with Rhett. With his mysterious nature and his violent temper, Rhett bears a strong resemblance to Mitchell's first husband, Red Upshaw. The public's infatuation with the scandalous Rhett upon the release of the novel reflects a growing interest in mysterious men with blemished reputations. Scarlett's kisses with Rhett are more violent

and even more erotic than any kiss she shares with Ashley. Their kiss outside the burning city of Atlanta is described thus:

He was kissing her now and his mustache tickled her mouth, kissing her with slow, hot lips that were as leisurely as though he had the whole night before him. Charles had never kissed her like this. Never had the kisses of the Tarleton and Calvert boys made her go hot and cold and shaky like this. He bent her body backward and his lips traveled down her throat to where the cameo fastened her basque. (Mitchell 374)

After Frank's death, as Rhett proposes, he gives Scarlett another kiss, and she undergoes a similar experience, feeling "sensations she had never known she was capable of feeling" (Mitchell 776). The most blatant sexual moment in the book occurs when a drunk, angry Rhett carries Scarlett upstairs in their home and forces himself upon her over the course of the night. The next morning, Scarlett lies in bed remembering the previous night:

She went crimson at the memory and, pulling the bed covers up about her neck, lay bathed in sunlight, trying to sort out the jumbled impressions in her mind. . . . And now, though she tried to make herself hate him, tried to be indignant, she could not. He had humbled her, hurt her, used her brutally through a wild mad night and she had gloried in it. . . . A lady, a real lady, could never hold up her head after such a night. But, stronger than shame, was the memory of rapture, of the ecstasy of surrender. (Mitchell 871-72)

Many have labeled this scene as a rape scene, but it could also be described as an exercise in sexual dominance on Rhett's part. Either way, Scarlett enjoys this violent sexual encounter. Scarlett, who normally seeks power over others, enjoys Rhett's total control over her on this night. Because of social taboos, this scene was not a major point of discussion when the book was published, but the fact that there was also no backlash indicates that the general public did not have a problem with Scarlett's enjoyment of her violent sexual experience.

It is much more difficult to draw connections between the novel and 1930s culture on the subject of sexuality than it is in other areas; sexual ideas were becoming less strict, but it was still not a topic of general discussion, so it is difficult to get a detailed understanding of the sexual climate of the time. Based upon what information is available, however, the general acceptance of the sexual themes in *Gone with the Wind* reflects the sexual attitudes of the era. It is worth additional notice that even in a "risqué" novel like *Gone with the Wind*, sexuality is never blatantly discussed; the most explicit references are the kissing scenes and Scarlett's morning-after recollection. The roundabout way in which Mitchell handles sexuality is indicative of the coyness concerning sexuality during the period. Despite the delicate wording, though, *Gone with the Wind* was nonetheless considered racy in its own time, but the popularity of the novel indicates that its edgy nature was not a problem for most readers.

Race

In the context of the story of *Gone with the Wind*, slavery is a part of the setting rather than a central theme. Still, Mitchell's portrayal of race relations is impossible to miss. At the time of its publication, only far-left and African American groups took issue

with its portrayal of race, but as time has gone on, race has become the central area of interest for those who analyze the novel. Generally, the focus is placed on the negative stereotypes used and the ways in which the Antebellum South is idealized. While the novel does contain these aspects in abundance, a study that only focuses on these aspects will miss the complexities of the interracial relationships in the story and the positive portrayals of the individual black characters. A deeper study of the race-related parts of the novel reveals Mitchell's disagreement with the practice of segregation that was law in the South and often habit in other places. It can also lead to a greater understanding of the general attitude toward race at the time.

To be clear, the novel contains many unfair generalizations and stereotypes of its black characters and advocates a social system founded upon racial inequality. Scarlett's beloved Tara, a sacred place in the novel, was "built by slave labor" (Mitchell 65). Slave labor is central to the world in which Mitchell's Southern aristocrats live, and although Mitchell does portray the Antebellum South as a flawed system that cannot last, slavery is essential to its economy and its luxury. Despite their hard work in building Tara, however, the narrator claims that "[w]ith unerring African instinct, the negroes had all discovered that Gerald had a loud bark and no bite at all, and they took shameless advantage of him" (Mitchell 68). Chitterlings are described as a "dish of hog entrails so dear to negro hearts" (Mitchell 107), and Mammy, subscribing to the values of the white culture around her, says of the Slatterys, "[D]id dey be wuth shootin' dey'd have niggers ter wait on dem" (Mitchell 82). The stereotypical portrayal of blacks in the novel is that they are lazy people with simple minds and simple tastes who, even in the mind of the strongest and most dignified black character in the novel, are meant to work for whites.

There are positive stereotypical characteristics as well (ingenuity, for instance), and Mitchell's individual black characters tend to defy most of the negative stereotypes, but the generalizations are still applied to the race as a whole. These stereotypes and ideals, however, were common at the time, especially (though not exclusively) in the South.

The individual black characters tend to break negative stereotypes rather than perpetuating them and are usually strong, dignified characters with whom Scarlett bonds emotionally. Mammy, for instance, is an authority figure as well as a second mother figure to Scarlett, especially after Ellen's death. The narrator says that "her code of conduct and her sense of pride were as high as or higher than those of her owners" (Mitchell 43). She is as integral as Ellen in training Scarlett to be (or appear to be) a lady, but unlike Ellen, she "was under no illusions about her and was constantly alert for breaks in the veneer. Mammy's eyes were sharper than Ellen's, and Scarlett could never recall in all her life having fooled Mammy for long" (Mitchell 76). She even asserts her maternal authority with Ellen when Ellen arrives from delivering a baby long after supper time. She tells Ellen, "'Miss Ellen, you gwine eat some supper befo' you does any prayin''" (Mitchell 82). Scarlett often resents Mammy's authority and her keen eye, but when things go wrong, she "wanted Mammy desperately, as she had wanted her when she was a little girl, wanted the broad bosom on which to lay her head, the gnarled black hand on her hair" (Mitchell 959). Mammy has strong convictions and opinions, and she expresses them freely. According to the narrator:

Mammy had her own method of letting her owners know exactly where she stood on all matters. She knew it was beneath the dignity of quality white folks to pay the slightest attention to what a darky said when she

was just grumbling to herself. She knew that to uphold this dignity, they must ignore what she said, even if she stood in the next room and almost shouted. It protected her from reproof, and it left no doubt in anyone's mind as to her exact views on any subject. (Mitchell 82)

As the above quote demonstrates, Mammy also knows how to use the social system around her to her own advantage. During the period of deep poverty at Tara, she works hard performing her duties to help keep the family alive, and after the war, she remains fiercely loyal to the whites she considers "her" family. Despite the master-servant nature of their relationship, Mammy "felt that she owned the O'Haras, body and soul" (Mitchell 42). It is clear that Mammy loves the O'Haras, they love her, and they need each other to survive.

Uncle Peter is another of Mitchell's smart, dignified black characters.

Technically, Uncle Peter is Aunt Pittypat's manservant, but in reality, he takes care of her and manages her home. After marrying Scarlett, Charles tells her about everything Peter has done for the family:

"He went through all the Mexican campaigns with Father, nursed him when he was wounded—in fact, he saved his life. Uncle Peter practically raised Melanie and me, for we were very young when Father and Mother died. Aunt Pitty had a falling out with her brother, Uncle Henry, about that time, so she came to live with us and take care of us. She is the most helpless soul—just like a sweet grown-up child, and Uncle Peter treats her that way. To save her life, she couldn't make up her mind about anything, so Peter makes it up for her. He was the one who decided I should have a

larger allowance when I was fifteen, and he insisted that I should go to Harvard for my senior year, when Uncle Henry wanted me to take my degree at the University. And he decided when Melly was old enough to put up her hair and go to parties. He tells Aunt Pitty when it's too cold or too wet for her to go calling and when she should wear a shawl. . . . He's the smartest old darky I've ever seen and about the most devoted. The only trouble with him is that he owns the three of us, body and soul, and he knows it." (Mitchell 151-52)

Like Mammy, Uncle Peter is a parental figure for Charles and Melanie, and if Melanie's character is any indicator, he was more than adequate for the job. Also like Mammy, he has gained a position of authority in the Hamilton home because of his abilities, and he uses his high position for his own benefit as well as for the benefit of the whites who technically own him. He has his own opinions, and he voices them freely. Throughout Scarlett's stay in Atlanta during the war, he rebukes her for her many social sins. After the war, he is out riding with Scarlett one day as she runs errands for her lumber business when she has a conversation with a few Northern women. The women make derogatory remarks about him and about blacks in general (including the use of the derogatory form of "Negro"), and Uncle Peter is deeply offended. Afterward, he vents his frustration to Scarlett and chides her for not defending him and for doing business with Northerners. He says that when he dies, Aunt Pittypat will "lay me in de Hamilton buhyin' groun' whar Ah b'longs" (Mitchell 630). Uncle Peter considers the Hamiltons his family just as Mammy considers the O'Haras hers, and despite his servile position, he asserts his place as a member of the family.

Even though Mitchell's ideas for society obviously include a race-based caste system where power is concerned, she strongly advocates a symbiotic relationship between races based upon "affection and mutual respect" (Harwell 274). This idea of respect is shown when Mitchell writes about the use of the derogatory form of the word "Negro." In the novel, the word is appropriate when used by a black but offensive when used by a white. Uncle Peter is appalled and offended when the Northern women use the term to refer to him, and when Scarlett, in frustration, uses the word for the first time, she thinks to herself, "There . . . I've said 'nigger' and Mother wouldn't like that at all" (Mitchell 383). Mitchell seems to be against the use of the word by whites, a sign of respect that carries significant weight since she lived in a society in which it was commonplace to use the term and in which other writers, such as William Faulkner, used the term without flinching in their writings. In her own time, even though she believed in a social hierarchy based upon race, Mitchell advocated the advancement of African Americans. In a letter to Susan Myrick, she wrote:

We've [she and her husband] always fought for colored education and, even when John and I were at our worst financially, we were helping keep colored children in schools, furnishing clothes and carfare and, oh, the terrible hours when I had to help with home work which dealt in fractions. I have paid for medical care and done the nursing myself on many occasions; all of us have fought in the law courts and paid fines. (Harwell 273)

While it would be a stretch to call Mitchell or her novel altogether progressive, her personal views and the context of her time indicate that she had a strong belief in a

mutual need between races and encouraged greater interaction and respect between the two.

V. Literary Perspective

In the midst of the overwhelming success of *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell wrote to Herschel Brickell, “Herschel, did you review William Faulkner’s latest? I will not be able to read it as my reading for months will be so limited. If you can get a copy of your review without too much trouble, please send it to me” (Harwell 88-89). The book to which Mitchell referred is *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner’s novel, published the same year as Mitchell’s, also uses the Civil War and Reconstruction as its setting. It tells the story of Thomas Sutpen, a poor white man who insinuates himself into the ranks of Southern aristocracy in the fictional town of Jefferson, Mississippi, by making money and marrying a woman with a good family name but is later destroyed by his past. Unlike *Gone with the Wind*, Faulkner’s novel received poor critical reviews and public response overall. Also unlike *Gone with the Wind*, it has since been called one of the most important novels of the twentieth century by many critics. Comparing and contrasting the two novels and speculating as to why the general public preferred *Gone with the Wind* to *Absalom, Absalom!* should give a clearer picture of the literary climate and the popular culture climate of the time.

Many of the same critics who criticized Mitchell for her simplistic, straightforward writing style also levied complaints against Faulkner for his dense, complex style (which featured heavy use of stream of consciousness), claiming that it obscured the reader’s understanding of the already confusing story. Other critics,

however, said that the style was the novel's redeeming quality in an overly simplistic story – quite the opposite of what was said of *Gone with the Wind*. The two novels represent the extremes in style at the time, and the difference in style can be noted by a mere comparison of the first sentence of each novel. *Gone with the Wind* opens with the words “Scarlett O’Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were” (Mitchell 25). *Absalom, Absalom!*, on the other hand, begins thus:

From a little after two o’clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that—a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them. (Faulkner 2)

In these two sentences, it is easy to see the difference between Mitchell's straightforward, easy-to-understand sentence structure and the bold, complex sentence structure employed by Faulkner. Critics at the time preferred something between the two styles, while the general public flocked to Mitchell's straightforward, story-centered writing.

The perspective from which each story is told reveals the narrator's sense of connection with the story and influences the reader's sense of connection. In *Gone with*

the Wind, Mitchell strove to write from a contemporary perspective with Scarlett as the primary point of view, to create no sense of irony concerning the historical events. The reader may know how the war will end, but Mitchell's writing allows the reader to experience it as if such knowledge were nonexistent. Faulkner, on the other hand, gives his narrator a sense of distance from the story. The primary point of view in *Absalom, Absalom!* is that of Quentin Compson, who was unborn at the time of most of the events described in the novel. He feels a sense of connection with the events of the story not because he experiences them directly but rather because they are a part of the history of his hometown, a place where "he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth" (Faulkner 7). While readers throughout history have had varying preferences, readers during the 1930s seem to have had a preference for a story that allowed them to connect directly with the characters rather than one that emphasized the alluring mystery of the past.

Faulkner depicts change and survival in a way that is similar to Mitchell's method. In Faulkner's depiction, the men, like Ashley, are disillusioned and devastated when their beloved Cause is defeated, and the women, like Scarlett and Melanie, must take charge in order to ensure the survival of families. The relative lack of detail (in comparison to *Gone with the Wind*) and the complex, multi-vocal looking-back perspective, however, make the depiction of change and survival more distinctively specific to the Civil War and more difficult to compare to the Depression, especially from the viewpoint of a person experiencing the Depression. Quentin's father makes the story strictly historical in the first chapter when, speaking of Miss Rosa's desire to share the story of Sutpen, he says, "Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then

the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?’” (Faulkner 7). Right away, the story becomes Quentin’s exploration of his own local history and events that have already happened rather than a story that unfolds as it progresses. Readers seem to have preferred the ability to relate the events of the novel to their own lives to a distinctly historical narrative and a story they could experience rather than one they had to “discover.”

Gender is treated in a simpler manner in *Absalom, Absalom!* than it is in *Gone with the Wind*. Mr. Compson’s remark about the Southern women becoming ghosts conveys the (historically accurate) quiet role of women in pre-war Southern society. Like the women of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind* who are deeply devoted to “Our Glorious Cause” without fully knowing what that means, the women of *Absalom, Absalom!* generally subscribe to the ideals of the men around them. While the importance of women in the gathering of provisions immediately following the war is brought out in *Absalom, Absalom!*, only a small part of the story takes place during this time. The novel does touch upon the power gained by women at this point, but it is never a major factor in the grand scheme of the plot. Judith, in a manner similar to Scarlett, is a strong female figure even in her childhood, but she is still a background figure for much of the story. Rather, much of the story is told from a male perspective and is about male characters. The primary relationships explored in the novel are the father-son relationship of Thomas Sutpen and his son, Henry, and the brotherly friendship of Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon (who, ironically, are half brothers). Their relationships with each other are explored, but their roles as men in society are largely overlooked. In an environment in which the necessity of a strong community was being reiterated, readers probably found the society-

centered identities of the characters in *Gone with the Wind* more relevant than the individual identities of the non-contemporary characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Like the story itself, the explorations of sexuality in *Absalom, Absalom!* are centered on the male characters and are more period-specific than Mitchell's presentation of the same topic. The sexual desires of women are never distinctly acknowledged or explored. The desires of men allow Faulkner to explore the topics of brothels, interracial sexuality, and possibly even homosexuality and incest, both of which are hinted at in the following passage:

In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realising that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for the despoiler, if her could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride. (Faulkner 76)

The sexual tone of this passage is thrown into doubt by the statement that immediately follows:

[Henry] never thought. He felt, and acted immediately. He knew loyalty and acted it, he knew pride and jealousy; he loved grieved and killed, still grieving and, I believe, still loving Bon, the man to whom he gave four years of probation[.] (Faulkner 76)

Henry's emotional nature makes it unclear whether the previous sentiment is due to sexual attraction to his friend and to his sister or merely due to his intense feeling of love

and loyalty to both. Sexual intimacy between spouses, meanwhile, is portrayed as more of a business transaction with the intent of producing children than it is an act linked to desire and emotion. Again, the story and themes of *Absalom, Absalom!*, while accurate in a nineteenth century society, are more period-specific than those of *Gone with the Wind* and would have been less relatable to readers.

Much like *Gone with the Wind*, *Absalom, Absalom!* uses slavery itself as a setting more than a central theme, though interracial relationships are explored. Despite the mixed-race children of Sutpen, however, Faulkner explores the social and personal relationships between members of different races to a lesser degree than Mitchell. The only well-developed “black” character is Sutpen’s illegitimate daughter, Clytemnestra. Clytie, as she is called, uses the fact that she is Sutpen’s offspring when she can, but her rank as a non-white is also consistently reiterated. Characters also make frequent use of the n-word with no hint that this is an undesirable practice. Faulkner gives no indication as to what his ideas may be concerning the interaction of races in his own day. As with everything else, Faulkner provided a distinctly historical look at race that was hardly, if at all, relatable to society in his own day.

In exploring the differences between *Gone with the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, it becomes clear that a key point of interest in literature during the 1930s was the ability to relate to the characters and events of a story. If this comparison seemed to imply that *Gone with the Wind* is an inherently better novel, it only seemed that way because *Gone with the Wind* contains more of the things that readers wanted out of a novel. *Absalom, Absalom!*, an extreme in stylistic writing, provides a strictly historical setting that allows readers to connect to the mysterious past – something in which readers at the time were

not particularly interested. *Gone with the Wind*, on the other hand, tells a story to which readers could relate in a straightforward, readable manner, exactly the sort of thing readers wanted.

VI. The Film

A few months after the novel was released, David O. Selznick offered \$50,000 to buy the rights to create a film version of the novel. Skeptical of the possibility of turning the novel into a film, Mitchell initially declined. Macmillan eventually persuaded her to sell the rights, but Mitchell stated that she would have absolutely nothing to do with the making of the film apart from introducing the filmmakers to potentially helpful experts when asked. She refused to help Sidney Howard write the screenplay, and she refused to help with the casting of the movie or even to give her opinions. She told Howard that she trusted him, Selznick, and then-director George Cukor to faithfully adapt the novel into a worthwhile film. Her primary contribution to the film (other than writing the novel) was the recommendation of Susan Myrick, a writer for the *Macon Telegraph*, as a consultant. Myrick did eventually become a technical advisor for the film. The general public, on the other hand, followed the film's production very closely, and the production became a form of dramatic entertainment in and of itself. In a letter to Katharine Brown, Mitchell commented, "[A]s you probably know wherever two or more of ye are gathered together these days, the two or more talk about the movie" (Harwell 118).

Initially, many in Hollywood believed the film to be a waste of time and money because, in the words of Irving G. Thalberg, "'No Civil War picture ever made a nickel'" (Turner 35) (an ironic statement in light of the success of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Even Selznick, following this same belief, rejected the idea of filming *Gone with the*

Wind initially. Of course, Selznick did end up buying the rights to the novel. Selznick, however, wanted to be sure that his adaptation of Mitchell's novel would avoid offending audience members in the way that the novel had, so outdated racial terms (such as darky) were kept to a minimum, and the presence of the Ku Klux Klan was eliminated altogether. The production process was long and chaotic, including a lengthy casting process, budget issues, numerous script changes, and several changes of director. Finally, in 1939, three years after Selznick had begun work on the film (a longer time for film production then than it is now), *Gone with the Wind* was released.

The film received overwhelmingly positive responses from both critics and audiences alike. In a glowing review for *The New York Times*, Frank S. Nugent wrote that the film was "a handsome, scrupulous and unstinting version of the 1,037-page novel, matching it almost scene for scene with a literalness that not even Shakespeare or Dickens were accorded in Hollywood" (Amberg 184). Of the length, he wrote that "the spine may protest sooner than the eye or ear" (Amberg 184). The cast and the production design (sets, costumes, etc.) received universal praise. Ironically, though, Nugent did add that "we still feel that color is hard on the eyes for so long a picture" (Amberg 185).

In terms of plot, the film is faithful to its source material, but the atmosphere of the film is unlike that of the novel. In her novel, Mitchell deliberately created a rugged, earthy depiction of rural Georgia. Her world was not ornate and established like Charleston or Savannah; it was simple, vibrant, and new. Mitchell's introduces the everyday existence of her characters thus:

Life in the north Georgia county of Clayton was still new and, according to the standards of Augusta, Savannah and Charleston, a little crude. The

more sedate and older sections of the South looked down their noses at the up-country Georgians, but here in north Georgia, a lack of the niceties of classical education carried no shame, provided a man was smart in the things that mattered. And raising good cotton, riding well, shooting straight, dancing lightly, squiring the ladies with elegance and carrying one's liquor like a gentleman were the things that mattered. (Mitchell 26)

The film, on the other hand, has this romanticized introduction scroll across the screen:

There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South. . .
Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow. . Here was the last
ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave. . .
Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. A
Civilization gone with the wind . . .

With this sensational opening and the absence of most of Rhett's scathing criticism of society, the film, in many ways, romanticizes the Old South more than the novel does, as much of the novel's romanticizing of plantation life is later subjected to scrutiny.

The film perpetuates the novel's escapist qualities by featuring locations are more elaborate than those described in Mitchell's novel. Tara, for example, is described in the novel as "a clumsy sprawling building that crowned the rise of ground overlooking the green incline of pasture land running down to the river" (Mitchell 65). However, there is nothing clumsy or sprawling about the Tara of the film, which has large white columns in front and is twice the size of the Tara of the novel.

Mitchell took issue with the romanticizing of her environment and locations. In a letter to Virginius Dabney, she said:

I certainly had no intention of writing about cavaliers. Practically all my characters, except the Virginia Wilkeses, were of sturdy yeoman stock. . . . Many of us were hard put not to burst into laughter at the sight of “Twelve Oaks.” We agreed afterwards that the only comparison we could bring to mind was the State Capitol at Montgomery, Alabama. In the pages of unwritten history, no fiercer fight was ever fought than the one centering around columns on the motion picture “Tara.” The Georgians present at the making of the film . . . managed a compromise by having the pillars square, as were those of our Upcountry houses in that day, if they had columns at all. (Harwell 358)

Most audiences, however, took no issue with the ornate world of the film. Hollywood in general had a tendency at the time to romanticize things, as evidenced by the added melodrama of every emotional moment in the film, the romantic score, and the sensational portrayal of destruction as well as beauty. Film seems to have been a form of escapism for audiences, and the sensational nature of melodramatic films allowed audiences to have their escape.

The simplification of the story overlooks many of the sacrifices Scarlett made in order to ensure the family’s survival. As a result, she appears even more conniving and selfish than in the novel, and her “gumption” often comes across as mere bitterness. Many of the parallels between Mitchell’s Reconstruction and the Depression are lost in the film’s romanticized version of the transition between Old South and New South. Similarly, Scarlett’s defiance of gender roles is simplified so that her strength as a woman becomes a mere rebellion against the “proper” way of living. However, the

simplification of the plot does help to emphasize Scarlett's eventual ostracism and loneliness in the end, and it advances the novel's moral about the importance of community in survival. Regardless of what was lost or gained, audiences at the time felt that the film was the same *Gone with the Wind* they had read and loved.

The film's treatment of sexuality is more subtle than that of the novel, but not to a great degree. Some references and scenes were toned down, and the absence of Scarlett's perspective that eroticized many moments in the book helps to make those scenes tamer in the film. Still, Scarlett wears her unsuitable dress, flaunts her sexual charms to get her way, and kisses Ashley and Rhett with fiery passion. The film may be tamer than the novel, but it was still risqué for its time, a representation of the broadened views concerning sexuality that were emerging at the time.

Despite Selznick's intent of making the film racially inoffensive, the roles of the black characters are significantly reduced. The negative stereotypes and comments from the novel are removed, but so are the powerful and dignified traits of the black characters. Uncle Peter, no longer the smart, discerning black man who successfully reared Melanie and Charles, is reduced to one scene in which he clumsily chases a rooster across the yard in the rain so the bird can be "supper for the white folks." Likewise, the value of interracial relationships is downplayed, and Mammy, rather than being an emotional pillar for Scarlett, is a nagging, oppressive authority figure who keeps Scarlett in check. Despite the simplification, however, the film caused one great stride to be made for African Americans. On February 29, 1940, Hattie McDaniel became the first African American to win an Oscar when she won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Mammy.

Though many of these simplifications and omissions seem like glaring problems through a modern eye, at the time, the social implications of the story of *Gone with the Wind* were second in importance to the tumultuous love story of Scarlett and Rhett. The simplification of other plot elements allowed the filmmakers to cater to the desires of audiences by developing the relationship between Scarlett and Rhett over the course of the film. Every decision in the film, every deviation from the novel, was part of a conscious effort to give audiences what they wanted out of a film. The effort was successful, and even today, the film is considered one of the greatest films of all time.

Conclusion

The 1930s were a time of great change. Shifts in economics, philosophy, entertainment, and morality all took place during the Great Depression. As economic conditions made life difficult for many Americans, entertainment became a means of escape. In a world that was bitter and uncertain, consumers enjoyed entertainment that allowed them to be somewhere else and experience something apart from the reality of their everyday lives. Moral ideology became more conservative on the surface (as indicated by changes in fashion and in the content that was shown in entertainment), but a sense of openness, particularly in the area of sexuality, was developing.

This was the culture that received *Gone with the Wind*. Though Margaret Mitchell based the events of the novel largely upon her own life and local history, the novel's blend of escapism and social relevance (though not intentional) struck a nerve with millions of Americans. Mitchell's novel became an instant best-seller. Though the critics had mixed feelings, readers greatly enjoyed the book. In its time, the novel was criticized for its lack of a complex writing style and its melodramatic tendencies, but it was praised for its compelling and complex plot, its rich and realistic characters, and what was then believed to be its rigorous historical accuracy. Though some attacked the novel for its ideology, particularly in the area of race, the enormous popularity indicates that most people did not take issue with the novel's ideals.

The novel explores the central theme of survival in the midst of change. Scarlett and the other characters are pulled from their picturesque, dream-like world of ease into a harsh reality in which hard work is necessary to avoid starvation. For Scarlett, the sharp mind, strong will, and independent nature that had made life difficult before were now her greatest assets in survival. These assets benefit those around her as well, as most of the main characters depend upon Scarlett for survival at one point. Others, like Melanie, survive by following their strong moral convictions. These people also help others survive by encouraging people to join together in unity. Ultimately, it takes both approaches – a balance between the two – to bring everyone through hardship. The most important quality, however, is “gumption,” the will to survive, a quality that Scarlett, Melanie, and many others possess. Without this will to survive, characters like Ashley survive physically but are left with little or no sense of purpose. The process of survival and adaptation in the face of great change was evident in the Depression as well, and many in the 1930s learned the same things the characters in the novel learned.

Gender roles are a major issue in the plot of the novel, and parallels to the approach to gender in the 1930s abound. Scarlett is a paragon of the ideas of feminism during the 1930s. She is the independent woman who becomes the head of the house and who works to ensure her family’s survival, the determined individual who does what she wants or what she feels is necessary despite society’s disapproval, the woman who defies the restrictions placed upon her sex and enters the world of men without apology and without shame. Melanie, on the other hand, represents the domestic ideal that became highly valued during the Depression. She is the epitome of feminine grace, and she is, by

nature, the type of woman her society idealizes. Both characters are archetypes of 1930s women – the strong, independent woman and the nurturing mother figure.

Much like the sexual climate of the 1930s, the sexual climate of the novel is one of repression that is not as powerful as it at first seems. Scarlett's sexual desires reflect the developing acknowledgement of the sexual desires of women in general during the 1930s. More than just a release for man's sexual desires, Scarlett has sexual longings of her own and experiences sexual disappointments and fulfillment. The book is very delicate in its treatment of sexuality, however, and is indicative of a society that was ready to think and talk about sexuality in some capacity but was not yet ready to confront it directly.

The novel's complex treatment of race reflects the complexity of racial relations during the time of its publication. While unfair generalizations are made about the African American race and the novel encourages a social hierarchy determined by race, there is also a call for mutual respect between races and an acknowledgement of mutual need. Though never equal, emotional relationships between members of different races are also encouraged, such as the relationship between Scarlett and Mammy. Many of the novel's black characters completely defy its racial stereotypes. They are strong, independent, smart individuals who possess the ability to lead and to provide for others. They have strong moral values that guide their choices, and they express their opinions freely.

In terms of style, the novel was and is simplistic, but its popularity indicates that a plain, straightforward writing style was something readers wanted to see. In terms of cultural taste, it qualifies as "lowbrow" literature for the time, but its themes and its

relevance still caused it to be more well-received – by both critics and readers – than many “highbrow” works like *Absalom, Absalom!* that had complex writing styles and themes that were less relevant at the time. Its greater popularity with both critics and readers indicates a preference for social relevance in literature rather than literary or stylistic merit.

The film version of the novel was nearly as popular as the novel itself. In terms of style, it is more ornate and romanticized, something that was highly valued by both critics and audiences at the time. The rugged, earthy setting of the novel is turned into an elaborate, polished world in the film, and the heavy themes of the novel were downplayed in favor of the tempestuous love story. Films were the greatest source of escapist entertainment at the time, and the sensational way in which *Gone with the Wind* is portrayed on screen reflects the desire for that kind of entertainment.

Though *Gone with the Wind* continues to be a popular piece of fiction even today, it does not carry the same cultural relevance it had when it was first published. Perhaps that is the reason for its neglect in literary study; in modern times, the situations are not as relevant as they were in the 1930s, and it can be difficult to see past the glaring flaws in its ideology concerning race. The writing style, though effective, contains no bold or original uses of the English language. From a strictly text-based perspective, the book has little to offer. The impact of the novel in its time and the parallels between the Depression and the events of the novel indicate that the book is a useful tool for studying history, especially from a cultural perspective. This thesis was only meant to be a brief overview of the kind of historical information that can be gleaned from *Gone with the*

Wind. It is my hope that in the future, others will recognize the novel's value and subject it to even greater study.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amberg, George, ed. *The New York Times Film Reviews; A One-Volume Selection, 1913-1970, chosen from the 7-volume set*. New York: Arno Press, 1971. Print.
- Bergreen, Laurence. *James Agee: A Life*. New York: Dutton, 1984. Print.
- Book Review Digest* Vol. 32. Bronx: H. W. Wilson Co., 1936. Print.
- Campbell, D'Ann. "Feminism." *Americans at War* Vol. 3: 1901-1945. Ed. John P. Resch. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 55-57. Print.
- Conkin, Paul Keith. *The New Deal*. Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1975. Print.
- Farr, Finis. *Margaret Mitchell of Atlanta*. New York: Morrow, 1965. Print.
- Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!*. 1936. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Kindle Edition.
- Gone with the Wind*. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Howard, Olivia de Havilland, and Hattie McDaniel. MGM, 1939. Film.
- Harwell, Richard, ed. *Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind Letters*. New York: Collier Books, 1986. Print.
- "Margaret Mitchell: American Rebel, Interview with Margaret Mitchell from 1936." *PBS.org*. Public Broadcasting Service, 2012. Web. 11 Dec. 2013
- Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind*. 1936. New York: Scribner, 2007. Print.
- Strom, Sharon Hartman. "Challenging 'Woman's Place': Feminism, the Left, and Industrial Unionism in the 1930s." *Feminist Studies* 9.2 (1983): 359-286. Print.
- Turner, Adrian. *A Celebration of Gone with the Wind*. 1990. New York: Smithmark, 1992. Print.